

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 August 1970

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Suez Canal Front: Situation and Options\*

NOTE

The confrontation between Israel and Egypt, aided by the USSR, reached an especially acute stage in July. Although much attention is presently directed to responses to the US initiative, military operations continue. We examine below how the present stage of the confrontation came about, describe the present situation, and assess the military capabilities of Israel, Egypt, and the USSR in respect of the Israeli-Egyptian front. In the light of the military evidence, we examine the options open to the several parties, try to judge what each party is likely to do, and explore to some degree the interaction of one party with another.

\* This memorandum has been discussed with representatives of the Offices of Current Intelligence and Strategic Research, who agree with its principal judgments.

## I. ORIGINS OF THE PRESENT CONFRONTATION

1. The confrontation between Israel and Egypt has gone through several stages since the conclusion of the June war. 1968 saw only sporadic fighting; 1969 featured the opening of Nasser's "war of attrition", in which the Egyptians employed commando raids and increasingly heavy artillery concentrations in an effort to destroy the Israeli fortified positions along the Suez Canal and to inflict unacceptable casualties on the Israelis. Israel responded to this initially by employing aircraft against Egyptian artillery and other targets; actions were more frequent, but days often went by without aerial attacks. In this fighting, Israel systematically destroyed much of the Egyptian surface-to-air missile and radar system east of the Nile Delta.

2. Beginning in early January 1970, Israel went on to stage a number of raids on targets in Egypt's heartland; the raids were important not so much for the damage they caused, but for their public exposure of Egyptian helplessness and Soviet embarrassment. Faced with a demonstration of Israeli capability to fly virtually at will over Egypt, Nasser turned to the Soviets for help. He may, as he has stated in his

speeches, have asked repeatedly for direct Soviet assistance even before the Israeli penetration raids. If so, the Soviets refused to provide it until the Israeli raids faced them with the choice of being seen to fail to help their client or of involving themselves directly.

3. The Israelis responded by announcing that they would refrain from attacking most of Egypt, but that they considered a zone -- imperfectly delimited but reaching to about 25 miles west of the Suez Canal -- open to their air attack. Israel said it would resist any attempt by the Egyptians and/or the Soviets to deny them freedom of the air in this region, which it regards as essential to maintaining its position on the east bank of the Canal. At the same time, the Israelis drastically increased the intensity of their bombing raids within this ill-defined zone. Prior to April, they had for the most part carried out bombing raids in response to artillery strikes or commando raids. Since mid-April, the Israeli Air Force has bombed the Egyptian-held side of the Suez Canal every

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II. THE PRESENT SITUATION

8. The Israelis are continuing to carry out the same military policy they have for the past year. They pound away, using aircraft as flying artillery, at Egyptian artillery positions and other targets on the west bank of the Suez Canal. They continue to hold their side of the Canal

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9. The Egyptians are still deployed throughout the region extending for 25 or so miles west of the Canal.

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### III. CAPABILITIES

#### A. Egypt

13. Egyptian forces are able to continue to harass the Israelis in Sinai by artillery fire and commando action. The Egyptian Air Force will continue to be vastly inferior to the Israeli for a long time; in air-to-air combat, its pilots are regularly out-maneuvered and shot down by the Israelis, and the number of qualified Egyptian combat pilots is pitifully small, about one pilot for every two aircraft. Egypt is unable to carry out a major crossing of the Suez Canal on its own. The Israelis would certainly see the preparations for such a crossing, they still have clear air superiority over the Canal and a strip west of it, (the air defense complex does not provide air cover for the necessary Egyptian staging areas) and the complexity of the operation and the necessity for accurate timing is almost certainly beyond the capability of the Egyptian military command. While Egyptian commando small unit capability is good, it is unlikely that the Egyptians have developed any greater capacity for larger scale operations. Past performance indicates that the Egyptian ground forces have a long way to go in developing a respectable capability in a mobile offensive war.

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B. Israel

14. Israel is able in the present situation to hold the Suez Canal line and most of the time to keep casualties within tolerable limits. It is also able to inflict fairly extensive casualties on Egypt, as long as it has either the aircraft or artillery to reach Egyptian concentrations on the West Bank. The Israeli Air Force will remain superior to the Egyptian Air Force for the foreseeable future, both in terms of competence and in the numbers of aircraft which can actually be employed in combat. (Israel has about two pilots per aircraft.) Israel also has the capability to mount and to carry out a major cross Canal operation -- designed, for example, to chew up Egyptian formations and destroy equipment. The Israelis would, however, probably suffer heavy casualties if they undertook such an operation.

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15. But the essential equation is no longer simply one of Israeli superiority over Egypt.

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C. The USSR

16. The Soviets have demonstrated that their integrated air defense system can be very effective even against the high performance F-4 aircraft. The Soviets have, of course, the capacity to increase their forces greatly in Egypt if they decide to do so, e.g., by bringing more high performance aircraft, air defense units, or even ground forces.

IV. INTENTIONS

A. The Soviets and Nasser

17. The actions of the USSR, Israel, and Egypt along the Suez front are a mix of design and of reaction. It is often not clear whether a specific move is part of a planned series or not.

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20. The more important question, however, relates not to the past, but to future Russian intentions. From the Egyptian and Soviet point of view the intensity of Israeli military actions, e.g., the deep penetration raids and the stepped-up bombing of the past three months is unacceptable. The Soviets and Egyptians see a need, if not to inflict defeats on Israel, at least to demonstrate to Tel Aviv that its military can be effectively countered. If the Israelis do not recognize this, we think that the USSR is prepared to increase the pressure by further extensions of the defended zone. According to this line of policy, the US proposals come at a propitious time, placing Israel under heightened diplomatic pressure and

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strengthening the case for renewed Soviet advances if the  
Israelis do not respond.

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We do feel confident that Soviets do not intend  
to commit Soviet forces to support an Egyptian campaign to  
drive Israel out of the Sinai, and, as we said above, the  
Egyptians cannot do this on their own.

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22. Nasser, of course, wants to get the Israelis out of Sinai and we believe he hopes to accomplish this by political means. He probably wishes he didn't need Russian military protection, but accepts it as both vital and inevitable for some time to come. For all the advantage Nasser derives from it, the Russian military presence restricts him; with their forces involved in some fighting, the Russians can require that Cairo coordinate political moves with Moscow. We think it has in fact done so; Egyptian performance in responding to the US initiative of June -- while not out of harmony with Egyptian interests -- has been sufficiently careful, temperate, and controlled as to indicate that Moscow's influence has been brought to bear.

23. The tenor of Soviet reaction to the US June proposals, Soviet emphasis on a political solution and on Israel's right to exist, the moderate language in the Egyptian-Soviet communique of July 17th, and Egypt's positive formal reply to the US proposals contain the following implications. First, the Soviets and the Egyptians feel that their moves, which have limited Israeli freedom of military action, have put them in a position where they are better able to talk -- from some strength rather than from great weakness. This factor is

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clearly brought out in a Pravda article of 21 July. Second, the Soviets and Egyptians may feel that an Israel which has been shown its military limitations may be more amenable and flexible in working out the terms of a settlement. The Soviet and Egyptian interest in a "political solution" is, of course, in a settlement which gives them what they want. In any discussions, they obviously will drive a hard bargain. Third, we think that, while the Soviets recognize there are risks of hemming Israel in, they also feel that an unchecked Israel would continue to humiliate their clients, impede progress toward their version of "peace", and adversely affect the credibility of their position as a reliable friend in time of need.

B. The Israelis

24. Israel faces a very difficult dilemma. Although the Israelis retain the capability to beat all and any Arab forces handily, they find that their overwhelming military strength is unable to accomplish the political purpose they want, i.e., to achieve a permanent peace. Now they are faced with a Soviet shield which can be extended, if the Soviets choose, and which Israel can hit only at the risk of directly

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fighting the USSR and, over time, of losing heavily in aircraft. Some Israelis are facing up to this fact. There have also been some indications of concern at the rapidly growing cost of the military establishment, now over three times what it was in 1966.

25. Just how Israel will see and how it will play its options is a complicated puzzle. A major change would require that in the first place decision makers in Israel recognize that their strategy has not succeeded and that, in employing a policy of force to compel negotiations on their terms, time is not on Israel's side. The US June initiative -- and the Soviet-Egyptian acceptance of it -- is evidently causing Israel's leaders to look hard at this reality. Yet the attitudes of these leaders, military and civilian, their method of conducting the war, and so on leads us to conclude that they will not soon come to a judgment that they must change. It is not easy for them to admit that their strategy has not worked, and the temptation to "do more of the same" is likely to remain operative for some time to come, since they do not see any alternative which clearly assures Israel's security and since they see great risks in placing reliance in a settlement reached under great power pressure. Nevertheless, they probably feel compelled

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to go along with the US initiative, but as a matter of tactical necessity rather than conviction. Israel will endeavor not to have its options limited severely by acceptance and will exert great counter-pressure on the US.

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